

Have Symptoms of Depression? Rule Out Bipolar Disorder First

(NAPSA)—As celebrities like Jane Pauley and “Terminator” heroine Linda Hamilton talk about their experiences with bipolar disorder on television, many people may wonder: What exactly is bipolar disorder? How is it different from depression? And is there anything that can be done about it?

Bipolar disorder, sometimes referred to as manic depression, is a complex mental illness defined by extreme mood swings. It’s common to experience a range of emotions from day to day, but for the two million American adults who suffer from bipolar disorder, mood swings can be so debilitating that they destroy relationships and keep people from accomplishing goals.

In many cases the illness can make getting through the day seem impossible. At its worst, it can lead to suicide. An estimated 25 to 50 percent of patients with bipolar disorder attempt suicide at least once and approximately 20 percent eventually take their own lives.

Bipolar disorder shares some symptoms with major depression (unipolar depression) such as prolonged sadness, guilt, hopelessness, withdrawal, lethargy, anxiety, difficulty concentrating and suicidal thoughts. However, what makes bipolar disorder different from unipolar depression are the manic phases of the illness, during which an individual may have an abundance of energy, sleep less, talk faster, make reckless decisions, be extremely irritable and have a short temper.

Even though it is the manic phase that distinguishes the illness, bipolar disorder is often misdiagnosed because people with bipolar disorder typically spend much more time in the depressive phase than they do in the manic phase. They are far more likely to visit their doctor when they’re feeling depressed than when manic.

“Bipolar disorder is a chronic condition, but because it is biologically based, it is highly treatable,” said Stan Anderson, M.D., a primary care physician and clinical associate professor at Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine. “The caveat is that you need to be properly diagnosed. Not all depressions are the same.”

Bipolar disorder shares some symptoms with major depression but what makes bipolar disorder different are the manic phases of the illness. A correct diagnosis is essential.



Despite some similarities in symptoms, treatment options for bipolar and unipolar depression are quite different. Doctors and patients need to be careful because, when used alone, the same antidepressants that can help a patient with unipolar depression can often trigger a manic episode in patients with bipolar disorder. This is why it is so important for doctors to adequately screen their patients.

One helpful screening tool is the Mood Disorder Questionnaire, available at www.moodquiz.com, which helps doctors and patients recognize the signs and symptoms of bipolar disorder. The quiz is convenient, free and confidential. However, it is only a screening tool and it is important to note that only a doctor can make a proper diagnosis.

“There is help out there for people who suffer from bipolar depression. Unfortunately, when left untreated or treated improperly, bipolar depression can wreak havoc on all aspects of a person’s emotional, financial and social life,” said Dr. Anderson. “It is only with the appropriate diagnosis that a person suffering from bipolar or unipolar depression can begin to feel better again.”